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SERMON

PREACHED AT THE

ABBAY CHURCH OF ST. PETERS,

WESTMINSTER,

BEFORE THE

LORDS SPIRITUAL AND TEMPORAL,

ON WEDNESDAY, MARCH 7th, 1798,

Being the Day appointed for a

GENERAL FAST.

Herbert Walker Cornwall

BY FOLLIOTT, LORD BISHOP OF BRISTOL.

LONDON:

PRINTED FOR R. FAULDER, NEW BOND STREET.

1798.

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SERMON



" Die Juris, 8^o Martii, 1798.

“ Ordered, by the Lords Spiritual and
“ Temporal in Parliament assembled, That
“ the Thanks of this House be, and are here-
“ by, given to the LORD BISHOP OF BRISTOL,
“ for the Sermon by him preached before this
“ HOUSE, Yesterday, in the ABBY CHURCH,
“ WESTMINSTER. And he is hereby desired
“ to cause the same to be forthwith printed and
“ published.

“ GEORGE ROSE,
“ Cler. Parliamentor.”

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51 PSALM, v. 17.

THE SACRIFICES OF GOD ARE A BROKEN SPIRIT.

WE are informed by history, that the generals of antient times, before they led forth their armies to battles, ordered sacrificial rites to be performed, to conciliate the favour of their Deities. **W**E are called upon, at the commencement of another year of war, to offer up to Almighty God those better sacrifices of the heart, which we know he receives with favour. We are also called upon to humble ourselves in duteous prostration before the throne of God, to implore divine assistance to our Sovereign, in his earnest endeavours to secure the happiness of his people, to implore the same mighty aid

to the valiant defenders of our country, against a desperate and implacable enemy, and to implore the milder influence of the Holy Spirit, to render us not unworthy of the blessings we solicit. But still something remains to be done, on the part of every individual, in this hour of danger, towards promoting the best interests of the state. Each, in his private capacity, is called upon to descend into, and examine, his heart, to see what virtues are decaying for want of cultivation, what vices springing up to overspread with a deadly shade, and taint its purest faculties. We also, who serve at the altar of God, are called upon to do what in us lies, to instruct and amend those who are more immediately committed to our religious guidance. The duty is a very comprehensive one. To contract the exertion of it, within certain limits, must be our first concern: for to set forth and censure all that ought to be amended, would require not labour only, but days, for discussion. But it may be of use, in order to purify the stream, to examine with care its source; to look into the causes which have a tendency to corrupt us as a nation, and have corrupted

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a part of the upper ranks of it, both in RELIGION AND MORALS.

“ *Chuse Ye,*” * said Joshua, (there is something singularly great and affecting in the scene, in which the dying chief, surrounded by his people, is bequeathing to them the power of attaining national prosperity by means of national religion) “ *Chuse Ye this day whom ye will serve; as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.*” He well knew that there is in the very constitution of civil government That, which necessarily requires the diffusion of religion, to unite the component parts, and to give strength and solidity to the whole. For civil government may be considered, to a degree, as a standing publication and enforcement of the law of nature. The immediate designs of it are to guide men in the steady practice of duties which belong to their duties in society, and withdraw them from crimes, which tend to destroy or interrupt the peace of it. Though such government be in most cases faulty, and in none perfect, yet the good effects of it, even in the lowest instance,

* Joshua, 24 c. 15 v.

should incline those who experience them, to improve the principle from which they originate: but we, who possess it in its best condition, should be peculiarly careful to preserve it. To this end we must call in the aid of Religion. And here, without appealing to what is in itself evident, the reason of the thing, let us take our stand on the firm ground of experience, and hence observe, that a constitution of civil government, destitute of religious support, can arise from nothing but ignorance of mankind, and we may venture to predict, can end in nothing but confusion to those who happen to live under it. But it is asserted, that human prudence alone, is, of itself, sufficient to answer all the purposes of government. How then does it happen, that the chief of these, its own perpetual duration, is not answered? For let us suppose a nation void of Religion, or rather, since the supposition can scarce be warranted, let us appeal to a case of experience which borders on it. Mark then a nation arrived at a very high point of power and refinement, disturbed neither by external attacks, nor domestic animosities, and in a moral view, you will find these three characteristics of such a situation, a decay of Religion, a profligacy of manners, and a multiplicity of

of penal laws. The last are strong efforts of human prudence. But do they answer the end designed? If they did, would nations, after arriving at a certain point of glory, decline so regularly? The opinion, that every nation contains in it the seeds of its corruption, is a chimaera suited to the purposes of poetry, not of argument. To what internal cause then must we attribute the decline, and, at last, the subversion, of empires? Not to the want of human prudence, for that we see increases in proportion to the profligacy of manners, which calls forth its exertions: the remedy is, in its nature, as strong as the disease: but still there is a want of some superior power to aid and strengthen it. The only one it appears to have lost, is Religion. For if all things continue the same, or increase in due degrees, except Religion, and yet the whole system be changed, what cause can you assign for the change, but the decay of that principle, which had once the greatest force, but has now the least, in the system.

Certain it is, that the strength of religious sentiments is more visible in the early periods of all nations, than in the later. But every virtue borders on some vice.

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In rude and uncultivated minds, Religion is apt to soar above its level into enthusiasm, or sink below it into superstition. In the more advanced periods of society, when the minds of men are turned over much to investigation and refinement, Religion loses much, and sometimes all its force, because it fails in solving those doubts, and answering those questions, which scrupulous ingenuity may be for ever raising, though from the very nature of them, they are often incapable of more than a conjectural solution. When human sagacity, in its first exertions on religious topics, finds how little it can account for, the mind sometimes shrinks with awe from the attempt, and surrenders up the power of reasoning to the direction of religious feeling, which may then be carried to excess. But when human sagacity, exercised by repeated disquisitions, finds its expectations frustrated, because Religion unveils its mysteries only in part, the inquirer then perversely denies, that mysteries exist at all; because Religion cannot satisfy every visionary doubt, he eagerly concludes that it can confer no solid advantage, and turns from the light, which Revelation offers to the understanding, and from the comforts, which it has power to impart to the mind. Hence arises a want
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of Religion. But we have the authority of one of the wisest authors for asserting, that it is only a little philosophy which disposes the mind to atheism. Much science has always produced much Religion: and it has naturally this effect, by enlarging the faculties of the understanding, and advancing the accuracy of the judgement. But there its utility ceases. We are not at liberty to blend human inventions with pure Revelation from God. Our holy faith, when pressed into such an union, is injured by it, since it then becomes difficult to distinguish between the pure principle, and its debasement by intermixture.

It is farther observable in the advanced periods of a nation, that when an increase of wealth, and an intercourse with less virtuous neighbours have introduced into it luxury, with a long train of evils, the inhabitants become sensual and enervated; their passions more constantly heated, and more eagerly clamorous for gratification. The restraints of Religion are then found to be too severe for human action, and are evaded, or explained away, or denied to exist, because they presume to abridge men of the power of running into their own destruc-

destruction. We are very easily led to reject, in argument, what we dislike in practice. It will generally be found, that men are sceptical, because they are relaxed in morality, and infidels, because they are confirmed in vice. In truth, it seems impossible to prove, that any individual can be a good member of society, who endeavours to weaken, by argument or declamation, that strong support of it, Religion. Be it, that some doubt of the proofs of Christianity; be it, that they turn away from its doctrines, or, if it be possible, from its precepts: yet is it their interest, if the expression be not too mean for such an use, is it their interest to banish the profession of it from the society in which they live? Is it their interest to lose sight of the only true character which the world has yet possessed, of the great Author and Governor of nature, and of the Inspector and Guardian of the whole human race? Is it a gratification to surrender up the comforts which are afforded by the consideration of a Mediator, between the transgressors of the laws of God and his offended Majesty? Is it a matter of utility to surrender up the purest system of morality, which ever was formed for the direction of life and manners, and which, as we know from experience, has had

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such happy influence in softening and improving the human heart? Is it both gratifying to individuals, and useful to the state, to surrender up that system of faith, which exhibits, in colours so strong and vivid, what was seen but faintly by the light of nature, another world, into which we are to pass after our removal from this, a future state of immortality, in which virtue will receive its adequate reward, and vice its punishment? But this is the very foundation of justice. All legislators suppose it, and every oath appeals to it. Alas! what complicated mischief must arise to the state, from the subversion or suspension of Christianity. All moral evidence, all confidence in human veracity must be weakened by scepticism, and overthrown by infidelity. If then you have no respect for Religion, you have surely some regard for the comforts and security of civil government: If you have no idea of a future life, you have surely some enjoyment of the present: Revere therefore that Religion which confirms and increases its happiness.

But for what would you give up these benefits? Would to God that the experience of a neighbouring nation could not answer the question! We have seen, in their

case, the ruinous effects of a conspiracy to overturn Christianity. The Royal Associate in this plan, though blind, it may be hoped, to some of its objects, foresaw at last the ill consequences of it to civil government, and drew back in time to prevent the downfall of his own crown. But the piety and virtues of the unfortunate monarch of France, though they kept him free from any participation in such a system, could not prevent him from falling a sacrifice to the destructive consequence of its influence. Alas! who but must weep, even at this period, over so sad and unmerited a destiny? At length the eyes of the philanthropists in France seem to have been in some degree opened to the benefits of Religion, and they have produced a kind of religious system, enriched with a part of the morality of the Gospel, but, unhappily for its votaries, without the power and energy of its sanctions.

The errors of perverted science, and the inflaming influence of luxury, operate, in the first instance, on persons of the higher orders of life; and when unhappily they taint the mind of any one possessed of superior abilities and powers of persuasion, it is sad to think
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how far such deadly opinions spread, and with what force they make their way into the breasts of the young and unwary. Without one reflection, without one effort to examine and weigh principles, such persons eagerly adopt and defend them, flattered with the applause which they bestow on themselves for the honour of being enrolled in the list of adherents to some great character. The strength of reason which, though misapplied, we may respect in some eminent opposers of Religion, is exhausted and dwindled away, before the subject comes into the hands of their feeble supporters. They, unable to reason, endeavour to distinguish themselves by ridicule. The most sacred parts of Religion are converted into subjects of mean wit and gross buffoonery. Fancied peculiarities of expression in the Scriptures are selected and brought forward in social intercourse, with a vain affectation of pleasantry and derision. Hence it generally happens, that persons, who attempt to expose Christianity, expose themselves; not by betraying a want of Religion, for in that they glory, but a want of what they value highly, pure taste and classical erudition: for the same, or nearly the same, expressions which we may have heard thus ridiculed, are often to be

found in the most perfect models of composition. A strange perverseness surely it is, which, from detached sentences, in their places fit and appropriate, can raise laughter at the sacred Volume to which they belong, and exult in the display of a species of wit, despicable for the facility, vulgarity, and profaneness of its application.

Not less criminal are those other modern enemies of Religion, who employ against it, with a cold and dastardly malevolence, the illiberality of contemptuous insinuation, and the covered attacks of unsuspected mischief introduced into subjects of general amusement. By such means many are plunged into irreligion before they are aware of their danger, captivated perhaps more by the allurements of style and manner, than by novelty of argument, or force in directing it.

O Religion! Religion! Thou purest emanation of the divine spirit! may no open violence, may no secret conspiracies, drive thee from this land, so long powerful under thy protection, so blessed by thy grace, so happy through thy benignant influence! Never may

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we know what it is to lose the comforts which thou canst impart, such as the meanest of thy votaries hath experienced from thee, when, sinking in the darkness of this world under the pressure of severest woe, he hath felt thy kind hand raising him up, and shewing him in the realms above rest to the weary, and happiness to the penitent!

I have deviated for a moment, but proceed from the investigation of the causes which tend to corrupt us in Religion, to those which have had an unhappy effect on our morals.

The sternness of British virtue is no more. It is softened down into I know not what of pliancy of mind, and smoothness of artificial manners. What we have gained in polish we have lost in substance. There is something in the manners of those who are fearful to offend and desirous to please, so grateful to the kind feelings of the heart, that it is almost painful to remark the bad effects which such mild habits too frequently produce. But true it is, and the danger ought to be pointed out, that, influenced by these motives, conscience itself
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often gives way, and acquiesces in practices which it disapproves and condemns. When resolution is considered as obstinacy, and contradiction deemed unworthy the social temper of man, the easy natures which are afraid to offend, and desirous to please, give up the cause of virtue, and are willingly led off captives. Association produces confidence, and numbers give credit to practice. The most timid animal in nature, when encircled by a herd of its companions, feels a spirit not its own, and proceeds bold and undaunted.

It hath been already remarked, that there is a strange mixture in the characters of mankind. Great virtues and great abilities are seen to exist in the same person, sometimes with great vices, and often with certain errors which have more or less tendency to lead to vice. Instances of such a kind occur very frequently among those who are called Men of the World, and have a wonderful power in attracting the notice, and weakening the virtue, of those who are placed under them. For the natural wish to resemble great characters is more easily gratified by adopting their faults than their virtues. Hence it often happens that the copy resembles
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the original only in its defects, whilst the parts which deserve imitation do not appear to have been noticed.

There is too, in modern times, among persons of the second class of the community a boldness and obtrusion of vice which is mistaken for superiority of character; and under this assumed consequence, bears down all opposition before it. A clamorous display of profligacy appears to one unskilled in the manners of the world, to flow from a great and fearless spirit; and a senseless ridicule on the decency of virtue receives the applause which is intended to be bestowed on refinement of understanding and superiority of mind.

But something of the bad colour of our morals is to be attributed to less prominent causes. Men, it is obvious to remark, are governed to a considerable degree by appearances. Their natural disposition to respect dignity and rank is very strong and very useful to the state. Much therefore does it concern those who are graced with such distinctions to preserve them, by guarding their lustre from the injury of fordid intercourse. Virtue itself, in its restraints and reserve of modesty, is considerably
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injured by those, who possessing in their own persons an elevated situation in society, voluntarily descend from it, and confound by their manners the gradations of rank established for the benefit of the community.

Even the favourite amusement of the age overwhelms us with evil. Who can be ignorant, in the common intercourse of life, of the sad consequences which the love of gaming produces? Hence the sudden dissipation of property: hence the ruin and misery of the dearest objects of affection: hence the extinction of every moral and religious principle, the extinction of life itself by the hand of the undone and desperate suicide.

By such causes as have been hinted at, a part of the upper ranks, and in a less degree the lower, have been corrupted in Religion and morals. Nor can I omit to mention that the lower order of society, copying too faithfully the example of those above them, hath been particularly injured by their ill observance and profanation of the Sabbath. Many of them, at the moment of suffering an ignominious death for their crimes, have been heard to utter sentiments, from which it may be inferred,

ferred, how happy it would have been for them, either never to have been allowed a day of rest, or never to have abused it.

Remember these things, O ye transgressors, and shew yourselves men*. Think, ere it be too late, of the dangers which surround you from irreligion and immorality. But think not of yourselves alone. Your country calls upon you in this hour of its danger to shew yourselves men, to excite in your breasts that manly courage, which is seen in the brightest colours of its glory, when its lustre is purified by Religion. Look back, and view such a spirit in the "Noble Army" which fought and bled and died in defence of Religion. Thus actuated, thus emboldened, stand firm in defence of the altars of your faith, and the rights of your country. To secure their continuance, begin and continue to deserve them. From day to day remember the authoritative declaration, that those who honour the great protector of the human race will by him be honoured. Honour him, therefore, by humble adoration before his altars, and by offering

* Isaiah, c. 46. v. 8.

up as a sacrifice upon them all those corrupt affections of the heart which debase and press down the pure and active principle of virtue. With minds so prepared, may you be deemed fit to receive and "*put on the whole armour of God**." Then may you go forth to battle with shouts of anticipated triumph, and exult in holy rapture to the dismay of the enemy, "*The Lord of Hosts is with us; the God, whom we worship, is our refuge*†."

• Ephesians, c. 6. v. 11.

† Psalm 46. v. 11.

